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Essay 2: Novel
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**_Passing_: A Tragedy That Could Have Been Avoided**

Jealousy is a powerful emotion that can have negative effects on our lives. It can distort our perception of others, especially if we feel that someone is taking away the things that we hold most important to ourselves. Under these circumstances, our judgment becomes blind, leading us to act with impulsivity without considering consequences. In Nella Larsen's novel *Passing,* Irene succumbs to jealousy of her old friend Clare, consuming her thoughts and emotions. This internal perception leads to psychological distress, blurring the line between reality and imagination. Consequently, her mind becomes overwhelmed with suspicion and resentment, perceiving actions and threats that may not exist. Ultimately, jealousy drives Irene to think about actions that she never imagined herself capable of, such as the possibility of taking Clare's life. However, I argue that she is incapable of killing someone and that rage and anger wouldn't lead her to do something she thought about it because that would bring consequences to her life and social status. Clare decided to kill herself because her life was full of lies. The fact that she didn't tell her husband that she is black put her in a corner. She decides to die looking for the freedom that she lacks for the act of ''passing.''

Larsen’s novel starts when Irene meets Clare at the rooftop of a restaurant. Clare’s appearance changes her life. She becomes psychologically unstable, afraid of everything. As a result, Irene tries to overprotect her sons, her marriage, and her house. It was after that encounter that her behavior with others change because she is afraid that something bad could happen. Irene says something important to describe Clare and her unconscious. In one of her dialogues, she says:

> “I think that what they feel is- well, a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort of things you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you” (55).

For instance, Irene is feeling excitement after meeting Clare. There is a myth in her neighborhood about the girl whose father died, leaving only speculation and rumors, with no one knowing what really happened to her. Even though she sees her life as repugnant, she is intrigue to know Clare’s experiences of ‘passing’. Clare explains she had to “pass” at early age for concrete economic stability by marrying a white man. Juanita Ellsworth in “From White Negros” alludes to the phenomenon of passing as a “new recognition allowed to stand, economic opportunity and a new status result’’ (109). She argues that passing is great when a person sees an opportunity to grow economically. The Negroes achieved success while passing for white instead of staying colored. Clare sees an opportunity where others see a problem.

Irene understands the danger that Clare represents. But Clare’s curiosity about the Black community increases their encounters. First, Irene wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to do. She understands the safety risks associated with those meetings. Secondly, she is so excited to learn more about Clare, specifically, her sensuality, her looks, the way she communicates with others and her passion for life and freedom. Cheryl Wall's in her text "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels" describes how Clare’s appearance is the envy of other women, “But her looks, clothes, and facile conversation are the envy of the other female characters” (360). In others words, Irene sees in Clare the curiosity and boldness that she herself lacks in order to maintain their social status. She is not as social as Clare and dresses in a more conservative manner. She envies Clare’s life attitude and very deep in her unconscious she wishes to be like her. On the contrary, Clare envies Irene’s life, her honesty about her race, her stability and social acceptance. That is why they connect and continue seeing each other despite the dangers it entails.

Irene understands that in life we cannot have everything we want, but her organizational skills let her build a world where she is comfortable and secure. She also has problems, and unhappy moments, but she is living in the truth. Irene let Clare enter back to her life to experience all the things that she lacks, like having fun, enjoying parties, and embracing her body, her sensuality and her image as a woman. According to Mary Mabel Youman, in her text "Nella Larsen’s Passing: A study of Irony", Irene finds it

hard to express her sexuality. Youman said, “To her sexuality is not an inherent human quality, but a definite indication of one’s social class… Irene finds it distasteful to even speak of the subject to her husband” (339). In others words, Irene notices all of this in Clare's appearance and interaction with others making her realize that as a woman, and a mother, she has prioritized responsibilities, forgetting to enjoy life, and express her own sensuality. In Clare’s presence, she faces all of her problems, such as the deficiency of connection with her husband that lay on the presumption of Brian's infidelity with Clare. Irene faces her life in danger. To illustrate it, Larsen wrote “In spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life” (76). Psychologically unstable, she breaks a precious tea mug, a symbol of her life taken away. Irene begins to feel hatred towards both Clare and herself for allowing Clare into her house. Introducing Clare to her husband and friends was a significant step for Irene, and without realizing it, she was gradually losing her sense of security and control. This is why she starts looking for ways to remove Clare from her life by ignoring her calls and no longer inviting her over. She was determined to take back the control of her life and emotions.

Irene feels responsible for leaving things behind without thinking about it to please a demanding society, abandoning what she loved must without realizing it. As a consequence of her actions, she discovers that her husband finds pleasure in Clare. Her suspicious are confirmed when Brian

invites Clare to a party that Irene had not intended to include her in. From that moment, she begins considering the possibility of revealing everything to Clare's husband. But she didn't have the courage to go through with it.

The end of the story is not surprising. Clare goes to a party in Harlem with her Negro friends and is discovered by her husband, who arrives at the party after following her to Irene's house. This leads to a hard encounter, where Clare's husband calls her "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (79). Clare is scared, and runs next to Irene in front of the window, which facilitates the confusion of the incident that marks her destiny in the story. This leads to an awful tragedy, her death. It looks like the way Larsen wrote leaves us all confused about who is guilty. Although everything looks set up to be Irene being the one who pushed Clare and caused her death, I can conclude that the real guilt is "passing." During the novel, everyone is concerned about Clare's safety, even herself. When she is called 'nig' from her dangerous and racist husband, Clare is determined to find her freedom by committing suicide, as her only choice to find peace in her life.

Larson's story unveiled the principal problem of societies. This is the lack of honesty and the deferral of our identity to conform to society. People who avoid talking about their feelings, their identities, and race are people who conform to society. Irene and Clare personally look different, but deep inside they are similar. They have lost their identity looking for social stability. They chose the kind of freedom they are living. Clare shows us how necessity motivates us to 'pass' to be able to have the economic

freedom that we desire. On the contrary, Irene is a vivid example that we can’t control everything, and security is an unstable state that can be shattered by someone or something. When Clare enters Irene’s life and disrupts everything she had accomplished, she feels lost and displaced. Her hate for Clare grows to the point where she wishes her dead. Perhaps this is the only thing Irene feels guilty for. I understand that rage can drive us to do things we never intended, but in Irene’s case, her concern with maintaining her social image prevents her from acting on those feelings. This is why she ends up choking on what just happened, and the guilt linger in her mind. Even though she didn’t act on her thoughts, the fact that she thought about it is enough for her to feel guilty.

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